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ABSTRACT

Local boards of education in rural school districts have a unique opportunity to strengthen education through empowering various constituencies. Research shows that people believe in the potential of the local board, but also believe that school boards often fail to move effectively on critical leadership issues. Leadership as a process of empowerment is characterized by clarity of vision, empowerment of subordinates, and emphasis on growth and renewal. This view of leadership suggests changes in the relationship between school boards and superintendents. School boards need to build coalitions and develop linkages among educational professionals, patrons, community and business leaders, and other interested stakeholders involved in the process of educating children. In this leadership role, the board and superintendent can work together toward empowerment of all constituencies. Forming linkages involves written policies that demonstrate congruence of expectations, values, and goals. School boards need to invest time in advocacy, developing goals and strategic planning, promoting cooperation and assertiveness, developing an educational mission, coordinating policy, overseeing functions, and encouraging collaboration. The challenge for the board of education is to develop a perception of its role as the catalyst to empower the teachers, administrators, and community at large to improve the learning environment for all participants. (LP)

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A Challenge for School Boards' Leadership in Rural America

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A Challenge for School Boards Leadership in Rural America

Educators in the rural school districts of America have a unique opportunity to strengthen education through "empowering" the various constituencies. Because the rural districts are close to these constituencies both in physical proximity and in value concensus, they have the ideal setting to empower.

The local school board is the key to this opportunity. The National School Boards Association has identified the local school board as the leader of education in the rural community.

Findings from research, however, show that while people believe in the potential of the local board, they do not believe the boards are presently serving with the strength expected of them. Political, business and civic leadership groups across the country conclude with some of the vigor with which they pushed through the reforms of the 80's that the school boards have failed to move effectively on critical leadership issues.

Leadership is the process of empowerment, and "the collective effect of leadership . . . is most evident when (1) people feel significant; (2) learning and competence matter; (3) people are part of a community; and (4) work is exciting" (Bennis, 1985). Empowerment is a state of mind as well as a

strength resulting from position, policies and practices. "As leaders, we become more powerful as we nurture the power of those below us" (Block, 1987, p. 64). As a board of education begins to understand its leadership role in this context, policy development procedures and the policy handbook become instruments of empowering leadership.

Leadership as a process of empowerment is characterized by three major components: (1) the clarity of vision; (2) the empowerment of subordinates; and (3) the emphasis on renewal. Gardner (1986, p. 7) defines leadership as "a process of persuasion and example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to take action that is in accord with the leaders' purposes or the shared purposes of all."

This characterization of the role of leadership suggest that changes must occur in the dominant perception of the role of school boards. Leadership in this context is less a set of techniques and methods than a point of view or a frame of mind. Furthermore, this view of leadership suggests changes in the behavior of a board and superintendent.

A typical scenario of a board of education/superintendent relationship might be compared to a popular TV act in which a participant attempts to get several 24-inch brass platters spinning on top of eight-and-ten foot flexible poles. The

participant begins by spinning first one platter, then another, then another. When one platter is freely spinning, another begins to wobble. The individual races to it, spins it, then starts another. Meanwhile another platter begins to wobble. The frantic participant rushes to that platter and gets it spinning, but then sees other platters wobbling to a halt. This process continues until it is physically impossible for the participant to start new platters spinning or to keep up with the platters already on the poles. Too many administrative units attempt to deal with educational issues in this way: first, curriculum, then on to buses, then on to parent problems. Leaders run from one wobbling platter to another, spin one and move on to the next. The process becomes continual maintenance and crises management rather than renewal.

I would like to suggest a new picture: one wherein school board leaders build coalitions and develop linkages among education professionals, patrons, community and business leaders and other interested stake holders in the process of educating children. This is consistent with the view of Ziegler (1977) who identified one of the major stumbling blocks of successful school boards to be "too few linkages."

The board of education must focus its time and attention on forming these linkages. The process involves building congruence of perception and role. The on-going effort must be

made to identify expectations and values of the various constituency groups. Then ss expectations and values are heard and felt, the school board can formulate policies that provide the vision to motivate participants to continual renewal. This perspective of leadership is not designed to keep the platters spinning, but to create a state of mind as well as resultant policies and practices that will nurture the power of all participants.

In this leadership role, the board and superintendent can work toward empowerment of all participants, clarify their collective vision, and emphasize renewal. This process, as Gardner (1986, p. 7-9) suggests, encourages longer term thinking and looks beyond the unit to grasp relationships and recognize larger realities. The process reaches out to influence constituents beyond the board's immediate jurisdiction and boundaries. Emphasis can be placed on the intangibles of vision, values and motivation. As a result, people can be persuaded to act in accordance with shared purposes and expectations.

The linkage between groups is expressed in written policy. As interactive processes occur between and among groups, the result of each interaction refines and validates present policy.

Why must written policy function as the link in this process? Any careful study of a state's make up of board members and superintendents would show an unstable continuity. The state of Utah is a good example of this. Utah has 40 districts, 39 of them with five board members and one with seven for a total of 202. For any given year over the past 10 years, close to 60 new board members have had to be trained by the State School Boards Association. In addition, depending on the year, from 5 to 13 new superintendents take office; thus up to one third of the districts could be affected by this major leadership change. Written policy provides the stable, tangible link between the new organization and organizations from the past and future.

The concept of policy as the instrument of linkage is pictured as follows:

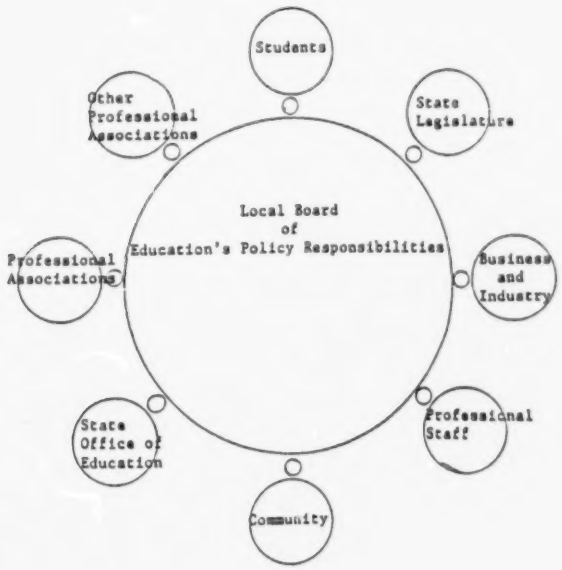

Figure I

Each of the groups is linked into the structure of the whole through written policy. The end result is a more common base of expectations, values, and goals that results a greater congruence of vision.

The process of this effort could be visualized like this:

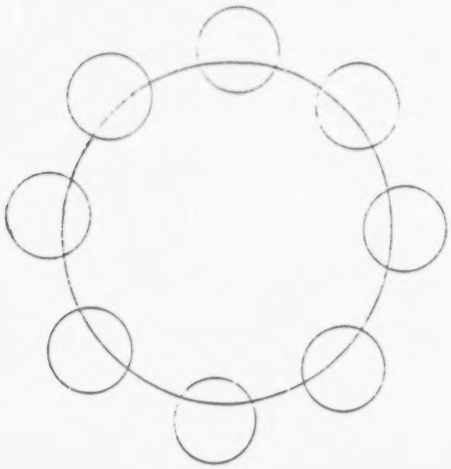

Figure II

The ideal description of empowerment is given by Bennis (1987):

> We become empowered when we create around ourselves a bubble that expresses our wishes of what we want to create. The bubble is the way we and our unit operate. . . (1) people feel significant; (2) learning and competence matter; (3) people are part of a community and; (4) work is exciting.
>
> The ideal would look like this:

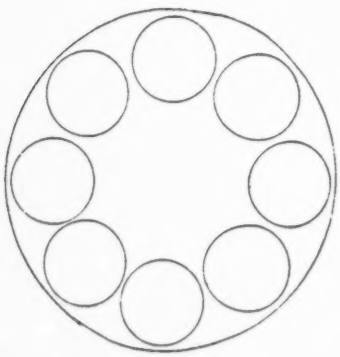

Figure III

The IEL and others identify several key elements for boards to consider. Since elected members of school boards participate on a limited time allotment, the choice of how to invest that time gains added importance (IEL 1986).

Terms that emerge from IEL studies are *advocacy*, *goals* and *strategic planning*, *cooperation*, *assertiveness*, *mission*, *vision*, *coordinate policy*, *oversight functions*, and *collaboration*. Terms such as these continually emerge as directives to the boards' functions of the future. Boards need to invest their time in these functions rather than in the quasi-administrative roles that dominate the current functions of boards across the United States.

Effective schools literature has focused public attention on how schools are judged. Meyer and Rowan (1978) state: "Schools are judged by external constituencies as much on appearances as on results." Deal (1977) points out:

> The faith and belief of teachers and administrators, as well as outsiders, are rooted more in perception than in tangible experience. Perception is based on shared values and symbols. . . . At policy levels, improvement would affect how citizens view public schools.

These are but a few of the issues relating to school improvement. The task is complex and demanding. In the final analysis, a board of education's ultimate purpose is to

improve the quality of education in the community in which it serves; the challenge stated in its most fundamental form is that the board of education must develop a perception of its role as the catalyst to empower the teachers, administrators and community at large to improve the learning environment for all participants.

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